

JULIE HARTING

JOAN SPEAKS

**nineteen verses based on the nineteen
years of the life of Joan of Arc**

POETRY BY G.L. FORD

**FOR
FLUTE
CLARINET IN Bb
VIOLIN
CELLO
PIANO
SNARE DRUM
NARRATOR**

—Joan Speaks—
by G. L. Ford

1.
You learn this early:
in the hay lurks fire,
awaiting permission to feed.

You learn to embrace
with more than just arms
or not at all.

2.
My sister's breath
made the nest I slept in,
but many nights
I lay awake, wondering
if the day's clearest light
had hidden itself
in one small stone
or blade of grass
or tightly shut morning glory
I might take in my hand
and open.

3.
No one thought to cast
this monument:
my feet on pebbles in water,
my skirt in my hands brushing my calves,
my kerchief pale over braided hair,
my eyes a laughing earthly light
that never welled from earth.

4.
There was an altar
and whiteness
bounded by dim high walls,
candles at the marble hem
of the virgin,
a voice intoning words
equally holy and incomprehensible.
There was a young and eager mouth,
dry with awe.
I ate the speaking God.

5.
In spring I brought flowers to the shrine,
in autumn, fruit.
When nights grew cold
father built fires and I
gathered kindling.
The dogs lay watching
and thumped their tails
at one kind word.
I never hoped to be
a steady figure of light.
I never thought that I
was a single letter
waiting to be pronounced
in a tale of constant war.

6.
Because the stars are quiet;
because trees and wind find voice
only in one another;
because the wheat grows high and golden
but mute of its joy;
because clay cast on a wheel
may take a fluted throat,
yet it lacks an engine
to break its silence;
because the crackling of fire
is a sound of feeding,
no more;

so I must find the word
that will speak for them all,
speak to what they most deeply are
from that which is most themselves.

I am learning—as though a knife
were tracing my heart—
who that word is.

He is a command.

7.
There are worms no rain
will drive to the surface:
they tunnel deeper, beyond
the reach of flood and roots,
to where other blind things,
hard and lightless,
take shape under pressure
of all that they flee.

Oh Charles, Charles, my Charles:
you cannot escape a sky
you have never seen.

8.
So many pennants
on so many towers.

So many beasts embroidered
in so many colors.

So many men,
so many teeth.

I found myself wanting a banner
of reddest white.

9.
I feared music most of all.
My men never cursed in my presence.
One tried to teach me to read,
but all I could do was laugh:
these flimsy black creatures
break nations, raise the dead,
save or damn our pilgrim souls?
I kept one hand on the pommel of my sword,
content with its bloodier eloquence.
Still, some nights I heard
hushed strings outside my tent,
stalking the maid
who had strangled her tears.

10.
Cowardice has no smell.
It evades the sense,
forever in escape, trying to stand
one step from where
it has been placed by providence and time.
I prefer the reek of my horse:
at least he knows how to obey.

11.
You learn that hunger
never ends,
and so is useless;
or you learn nothing at all.

12.
Somehow words persist,
even when I see
that my judges and I
are only fencing:
touch; touch; touch;
never blood.

Give me plain soil beneath my feet,
breath whistling through my teeth
(my Lord—my Lord—my Lord),
my consecrated blade.
Just the voice
of battle
is a forge.

I am iron, now cast into water,
stunned blind to the shape
that blows have given me;
and I am cold.

13.
Rarely have I had such eyes.
I have learned that I am least alone
when I am alone.
I saw the prison bars: slats
on a bridge made of light.
My allegiance to the things I find beautiful
condemns me.

14.
I never wept
as a mother weeps
when her labor is done
and her fruit lies vital
and suckling at her breast.

Do you pray for me, mother,
for your daughter the witch,
or do you cry the tears
of seeing fruit thrown down
before it ripens?

I know these tears.
They broke my sword
before it could spill
the blood to bring
my fruit ripe and full.

Unless that blood is my own.

15.
But only say the word.

Only say one word.
Say one word.
Anything.
Only a word,
my name, your own,
blessing, curse,
your word, the word, say it,
only the word, speak,
speak, speak. Aloud.
To me or in my presence,
for me, one word,
a small word but yours,
in your voice, give me
only that,
I listen and listen and am
only listening, my soul cupped
to receive it like wine,
strong red wine, wine
for strength. Not wine
but the word
that is most your own,
one singular word.

And your servant
shall be healed.

16.
In the dress they gave me,
the wimple over my hair (a falsehood
that grew day by day),
the soft woven shoes,
I could no longer hear my own footsteps:
fading
into a ravening wind
too massive to feel.
My dreams were blank
but for the smell of flame.

17.

I mean to say: to clothe yourself
in light, you must
steel yourself
to going naked.

18.

We call snow
that which most readily forgets,
that blankets just to conceal,
the urgent form of tree
or stone
paused
in its action;

that settles, with cold glint,
into shapes not its own
because it will leave.
The field was white.
If anything breathed,
it was not I.

19.

Not grass, not tree, not sky or cloud;

not star, not sun on trout-mail;

not stew in wooden bowls, not shuttle or wheel;

not bark of sapling, pale in churchyard dusk;

not eye or hand of enemy or friend;

not crown, not flag, not sword aloft and bright;

not bell, not murmur through altar-screen;

just smoke,

smoke.

What

is burning?

PERFORMANCE NOTES

The narration should be recited as a poem,
without overly dramatic affect, and with the
pauses and breaks of line as written in the poem.

The narration is not intended to correspond
exactly with the music (the narrator should not be
concerned with matching the pitches or rhythm of
the musical ensemble). The subtleties of contact
between the narrator and music, such as the exact
entrance of the narrator in each section, are left to
the discretion of the narrator and ensemble.

Joan Speaks

1

♩ = 96

Violin I: *sf*, *mp*

Violin II: *mp*, *ff*

Viola: *mp*

Cello: *ff*

Double Bass: *ff*, *mp*

Snare Drum: *ff*, *sf*

Vocal: You learn this early: in the hay lurks fire, awaiting permission to feed.

2

♩ = 50 ca

Violin I: *p*

Violin II: *pp*, *pp*

Viola: *pp*

Cello: *pp*

Double Bass: *pp*

Snare Drum: *pp*

Vocal: You learn to embrace with more than just arms, or not at all.

pluck strings inside piano with pedal held down throughout